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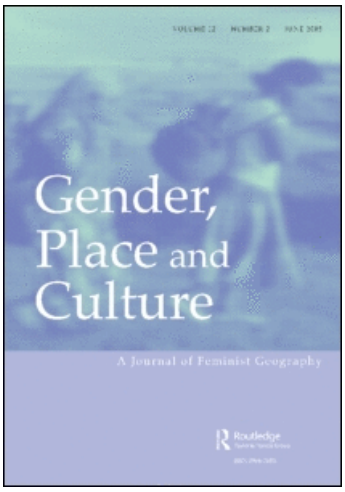

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Rhodante Ahlers [a]; Margreet Zwarteveen [b]
[a] IHE-UNESCO Delft Institute for Water Education, Delft, The Netherlands [b] Wageningen University, Centre for Water and Climate, Irrigation and Water Engineering Group, Wageningen, The Netherlands

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The water question in feminism: water control and gender inequities in a neo-liberal era

Rhodante Ahlers[a]* and Margreet Zwarteveen[b]

[a]*IHE-UNESCO Delft Institute for Water Education, Westvest 7, 2611 AX Delft, The Netherlands;* [b]*Wageningen University, Centre for Water and Climate, Irrigation and Water Engineering Group, Droevendaalsesteeg 3a, 6708 PB Wageningen, The Netherlands*

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The current neo-liberal moment in water policy appears to offer possibilities for realizing feminist ambitions. Several feminist scholars see the individualization and privatization of resource rights as offering possibilities for confronting gender inequalities rooted in, and reproduced by, historic and structural male favoured access to productive resources such as land and water. But we seriously doubt a progressive feminist potential of neo-liberal reforms in the water sector. We focus on water used for agricultural purposes, because neo-liberal water proposals are premised on taking water out of agriculture to uses with higher marginal economic returns. A first set of doubts involves water as a specific resource, largely because of its propensity to flow. Rights to water are less fixed and more prone to be contested at various levels and in different socio-legal domains than rights to other natural resources. The second set stems from our disagreement with the ideological underpinnings of the neo-liberal project. It reflects our concern about how water reforms articulate with wider political-economic structures and historical dynamics characterized by new ways of capitalist expansion. Furthermore, mainstream neo-liberal water policy language and concepts tend to hide precisely those issues that, from a critical feminist perspective, need to be questioned. Feminist reflections about tenure insecurity and social inequities in relation to water clash with the terms of a neo-liberal framework that invisibilizes, naturalizes and objectifies the politics and powers involved in water re-allocation. A feminist response calls for challenging the individualization, marketization and consumer/client focus of the neo-liberal paradigm.

Keywords: water management; gender; feminism; water rights; neo-liberalism

Introduction

Where in the past water resource management policies were driven by expanding supplies, or developing more sophisticated technologies to capture hitherto untapped sources of water, today's focus is primarily on institutional and legal reform. The question of water allocation – whose claim to how much water is recognized – thereby overshadows the previous dominant focus on distribution – how to get a certain volume to a certain location at a particular time. Wider historical and global economic changes induced this shift – to a certain extent demanded by the social and environmental movements of the 1970s, but also strongly guided by new forms of globalization strongly inspired by a neo-liberal ideology. Even though the neo-liberal economic project may currently be waning, it has dominated the global economic and political conjuncture over the last three decades. Following Jessop (2001), we argue that this project has a clear universal pattern with context-specific forms.

*Corresponding author. Email: r.ahlers@unesco-ihe.org

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Today's water questions involve complex distributional choices that are intrinsically political. Yet, the terminology of mainstream water discourse, embracing the language of neo-liberalism, hides political choices of distribution through naturalising, universalising and objectifying abstractions (Ahlers 2005b; Boelens and Zwarteveen 2005; Gleick et al. 2002; Moore 1989; Zwarteveen 1998).

Our aim in this article is to explicitly re-politicize water questions. We critically examine ways of articulating water problems from a feminist perspective on water security and for lending support to women's political agency. Our feminism most clearly shows in our interest in the power dynamics underlying resource allocation with gender inequality being a critical structuring force in this. We position ourselves in a methodological approach that recognizes the interaction of social, political and economic configurations as historical and dynamic. A feminist analysis demands critical scrutiny of how particular conceptual abstractions may reify and reproduce boundaries and binaries that demand questioning, such as those between the natural and the social, nature and human, or between the private and the public. Furthermore, it requires a linking of 'local' water struggles to larger historical and economic trends and forces, and a critical awareness of how struggles over resources are shaped by, and partly occur, through struggles over meanings and discourses.

Our research focuses on, and is informed by, examples of water used for agricultural purposes in Latin America (mainly Mexico and the Andean countries). The choice for agriculture is partly because of our irrigation background,[1] but more importantly because contemporary water proposals are premised on taking water out of (subsistence) agriculture to uses with higher marginal economic returns. It is therefore in the agricultural context where threats to water security may be more dramatic due to its impact on livelihood and food security, as well as on social cohesion of struggling rural communities. At the same time, it is also the context that is least well understood in terms of gender.

Our objective here is not to provide empirical detail of how neo-liberal water policy affects gender relations in a range of countries in Latin America, but to draw conceptual lessons from the large body of gender–water literature produced in recent decades for new feminist thinking and action.[2] Because the contemporary political and economic context is drastically different from that of the 1980s, it is opportune and timely to revisit and rethink the contents of feminist water agendas. Towards this end, we first discuss the meaning of water security and water rights and present the key assumptions that guide our analysis of water questions. The next section provides a critique of neo-liberal[3] water policies, focusing on how the neo-liberal historical moment involves both struggles over resources and struggles over meanings. In the fourth section, we present and critically discuss the feminist strategy of enhancing women's control over resources by opening up possibilities of private ownership to them, too. We end the article by proposing a few elements of a contemporary feminist water agenda.

Water control, water rights, water security

Our effort to make sense of gendered irrigation realities in Latin America hinges on an unravelling of the meaning of water security and water rights – two concepts that lie at the heart of contentious distributional questions in water. Our understanding of these two terms is inspired and informed by theoretical notions that capture how the boundaries between 'nature' and 'society', or between 'technology' and 'society', are themselves socially constructed. Human activity and nature form processes of negotiation, shaping landscapes which are dynamic and continuously contested because these processes are

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constituted by, and simultaneously constitute, the political economy of access and control over resources (Haraway 1991; Harvey 1996; Peluso and Watts 2001; Swyngedouw 1997).

Water security and water rights

Our conceptualization of water security moves away from more conventional uses of the term, which often tend to be state-centric (see Dimitrov 2002) and remain rather a-political. For a feminist analysis, recognition of structural scarcity constituted by socio-economic inequality and resource capture by the elite (Ahlers 2005b) is needed. We therefore define water security as a political process that is intrinsically relational. A notion of security as control, together with an explicit recognition of the politics of choices, informs this view (Mollinga and Bolding 2004; Mollinga 1998).

Our conceptualization of water rights complements this conceptualization of water security. Water rights often tend to be rather simplistically conceived as something a person either has or does not have. Yet 'owning' water is seldom this straightforward. Rights to water not only apply to the resource itself, but may refer to one or more of the following: rights to the resource itself, rights to the infrastructure and technology required to transport the water, rights to decide about water distribution, and rights to decide on who should have which rights (Boelens and Zwarteveen 2005).

In its most general meaning, a water right can be seen as the right that provides its holder with the authorization to subtract water from a particular source, including the particular social privileges and obligations that are associated with such authorization (Beccar, Boelens, and Hoogendam 2002). Water rights therefore express relations between people, and are expressions of agreement about the legitimacy of the right-holders' claim to water. Such agreement must exist within the group of claimants, but it is equally important that rights be recognized by those who are excluded from its use. Having the legal possibility (and social power) to take water is not sufficient to physically access it. This requires the adequate means (infrastructure, technology and technical skills) to actually take water from a source and convey it to fields. In addition, it is necessary to organize and manage not just the scheduling of water turns and the operation and maintenance of infrastructure, but also the mobilization of resources and decision-making processes around these issues. Responsibility for these management tasks may either lie with government agencies, with NGOs or private companies, with community organizations, or with a combination of those. Many irrigators' organizations in the Andes, for example, are community-type organizations, although some are set up or supported by government or non-government agencies. Elsewhere, in Colombia for example (see Vermillion 1991), private entities are more common, while in Mexico community organizations manage the older and smaller systems while the larger systems were only recently transferred to organizations set up by the government.[4]

Having a right to water often goes accompanied with the right-holders' participation in management decisions, and with a number of duties and obligations, such as the requirements to contribute cash or labour to the operation, maintenance and management of an irrigation system. When someone fails to comply with those duties, they risk sanctions such as exclusion from one or more water turns or the payment of fines (Boelens and Zwarteveen 2005).

Because of the variable availability and fluid characteristics of the resource water or because of the difficulties in rigorously monitoring and controlling water flows, there is a lot of scope for users at different levels to act in ways that diverge from distributional agreements as stipulated in state laws, regulations, infrastructural lay-outs, water distribution schedules and technologies. This is why the distribution of water is much less

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straightforward than that of many other resources, and it explains why water distribution is typically subject to continuous bargaining and negotiation, at all levels. Such bargaining may occur around the technical characteristics of the irrigation infrastructure, around the operation of the infrastructure, or about the very contents of the water right. In this respect water carries economic agency in that it can make land more or less productive, and its force has a capacity to destroy infrastructure and livelihoods. It also carries social agency in its demand for collective management alongside the cultural symbolic meaning it holds for many communities. Hence, control over it translates into political and economic power. Water distribution and control, therefore, cannot be understood by simply looking at the legal status of right-holders, nor can it be deduced from statutory law. An understanding of actual and historic water use and distribution practices is required, including the different norms and discourses groups of users refer to when claiming access to, or simply taking, water (see Benda-Beckmann and Benda-Beckmann 2000; Boelens and Zwarteveen 2005; Roth, Boelens, and Zwarteveen 2005).

Water rights carry meaning, and are negotiated and arranged in different social domains of interaction. Across domains, and even within domains, the norms and rules that are referred to may have different origins and sources of legitimization – a situation referred to as legal pluralism. The question which rules and principles are to be considered (most) legitimate is therefore often an intrinsic part of struggles over water. In the Andes, for example, state laws may be challenged by representatives of local communities by referring to 'their own' traditional socio-legal systems. In addition, the rules, rights and duties attached to water are closely linked to all kinds of non-water-related rights and duties and are closely intertwined with economic and non-economic institutions and networks of social and political relations. In other words, definitions of rights, of relative claims, of appropriate uses and users are closely embedded, not only in specific historical sets of political and economic structures but also in cultural systems of meanings, symbols and values and are therefore strongly gendered (Gelles 2000; McCay and Jentoft 1998).

To summarize, our conceptualization of water security and water rights refers to people's relations with other people as well as to people's relations with the bio-physical environment. It typically involves social agreements and negotiations. Although mechanisms of accessing water may be individualized, processes of acquiring and securing water mostly require collective actions and investments. 'Ownership' of water always is a deeply contextualized and localized phenomenon, linked to a particular territory and to particular social groups, histories and customs and embedded in (and part of) specific constellations of social relations of power.

Neo-liberal policies and critique

The neo-liberal project in water entails far-reaching re-allocations of water that need to be understood as part of larger contemporary processes of capitalist expansion. This section first provides a critique of the neo-liberal project and in particular the role of privatization in the reorganization of resources from the public to the private sector, and then discusses the consequences of neo-liberalism for effectively articulating and addressing feminist concerns in the water sector.

Privatization, decentralization and markets

Current policy development and thinking in the water sector in Latin America, echoed in many other regions of the world, is driven and conditioned by the global neo-liberal

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momentum and hence intimately tied up with the privatization discourse.[5] For the sake of increasing water use efficiency and productivity justified by the proclamation of a luring water crisis, reforms are proposed or being implemented that promote the transferability and marketability of water, allowing it to be used where its marginal returns are highest.[6] The approach argues that price mechanisms will adjust resource use to halt depletion, and that scarcity can be managed by privatization, public private partnerships and full cost recovery (Bond 2000; Harvey 1996). The proponents of privatization moralize this as being 'democratic', reflecting better governance, mitigating corruption, and achieving sustainability, while it also emanates the promise of a scarce-free palette of choices to satisfy all material and immaterial human needs (Ahlers 2005b; Bakker 2003; Gill 2001).

Privatization is an element of the marketization endeavour of the neo-liberal project, and is often misunderstood to mean complete private ownership of a resource or asset, shifting both the entitlement and management of water from public to private entities (Swyngedouw 2005). However, following Bakker (2003), it consists of an interaction of two processes of transformation: privatization and commercialization. Privatization concerns the reorganization of water *allocation*, with resources and assets that used to be publicly owned being made available for private ownership, and for idle capital to invest in and speculate with. Management of water resources and infrastructure also changes hands from the public to the private sector through a process of decentralization, often on the basis of the subsidiarity principle: the idea that matters should be handled by the smallest (or lowest) competent authority. The organization and formalization of water users' organizations at different levels is therefore better understood as an intrinsic part of privatization. Commercialization involves introducing the primacy of economic rationality and its economic institutions into the water sector to guide effective *distribution*. Marketing of water entails both privatization and commercialization, although they may not be equally developed and applied. In the Mexican case, for example, privatization was limited to the reorganization of ownership but commercialization was implemented to its full extent (Ahlers 2005b).

Security of tenure is central to privatization arguments, because of the idea that water needs to be transferable and marketable for it to be used in an economically efficient way. Private individual water rights are thus a central condition for water markets to emerge (Ringler, Rosegrant, and Paisner 2000; Rosegrant and Binswanger 1994; Rosegrant and Gazmuri 1994; World Bank 1996). Private water rights are also promoted as providing a good basis for allocating maintenance responsibilities among beneficiaries, and finally they are presented as providing tenure security to right-holders which in turn helps establishing incentives for investments in infrastructure. An influential advocate of this argument is De Soto (2001), who claims that security of property is essential for equality, while the individuality of its control will perpetuate freedom and prosperity.

Accumulation by dispossession – struggles over resources

Although portrayed as technical and managerial reforms, neo-liberal reforms entail far-reaching proposals to re-allocate water to those actors that are recognizable and identifiable in neo-liberal terms, or that can be moulded (through laws, regulations and institutions) to become that way. Neo-liberal water reforms do not come in isolation but form an integral part of the reorganization of capital on a global scale that is happening through contradictory processes of consolidation and fragmentation, in search of opportunities to expand markets for its surpluses. Consolidation of capital becomes for instance apparent in ever increasing income disparities, the merging of transnational

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companies and the domination of legislative powers on supra-national levels. Fragmentation occurs through decentralization of production, temporalization and flexibilization of labour, and devolution of responsibilities to lower government levels. These contradictory processes are compounded by the ever growing mobility of people, goods, technologies, images and ideas.

For the water sector, Harvey's (2003) concept of accumulation by dispossession provides a useful framework to understand water privatization as part and parcel of such larger on-going processes of capitalist transformation. The framework interprets water privatization as a new round of 'enclosure of the commons', referring to processes of dispossession of resources that release labour and land at very low cost to private entrepreneurs and investors. Through such processes subjects are de-linked from the social collectives they belonged to by way of the individualization of property and knowledge. The neo-liberal impetus of privatization along with liberalization and deregulation in the water sector, have made this new round of 'enclosure of the commons' into an objective of state policies.[7]

Even though current processes of water privatization are blurred, messy and full of contradictions, distress sales of both land and water rights reported throughout the Latin American continent provide a clear manifestation of this process of accumulation by dispossession (Ahlers 2005a; De Janvry and Sadoulet 2000; Deininger 2001; Fortis and Ahlers 1999; Ruben and Masset 2003; Thorpe 1997). This has led to a consolidation of water rights for the production for the global market. Agricultural policies in, for example, Mexico and Peru strongly encourage export directed production, and horticulture in particular. Such processes have contradictory effects on poverty and gender. On the one hand they may result in an increased demand for paid labour from which women and the poor may benefit, simultaneously generating potential for new forms of exploitation. On the other hand the appropriation of resources carries the danger of their depletion and risks producing further marginalization and exclusion. Therefore, how women and men are affected is mediated not only by gender but also by class and ethnic relations.

In sum, privatisation is not a mere technocratic measure to improve water management, but needs to be understood as intrinsic to wider processes of political–economic change that serve to open up water resources and services to the market, and make those amenable to capitalist accumulation. Most clearly through the transformation and individualization of property rights, water and water rights become commodities that are transferable, disconnecting them from historic labour investments and disassociating them from their cultural and social significance. Through an emphasis on ownership as the qualification for economic and political agency, the much praised freedom to own property, in actual fact, causes new and exacerbates old social inequalities and exclusions. Such transformations embody and are part of structural gender configurations on a global scale, which are largely premised on gender divisions of work in which the labour of women is typically valued less (Benería 1999).

'Seeing' water realities: struggles over meanings

The neo-liberal language frames problems in a way that screens off precisely those issues that, from a feminist and social equity perspective, warrant attention. These are the more contentious issues of politics and power, pertaining to questions of allocation and distribution. One way of depoliticizing water is through naturalization, for instance by treating water scarcity as a natural phenomenon or by attributing it to population growth rather than to industrial growth (Johnston 2003; Falkenmark 1997). A second way in which

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deeply political decisions are made invisible is through de-contextualization and universalization. Neo-liberalism is based on formidable abstractions, about the functioning of the market as well as about the behaviour of its players. It presents the instruments of efficient re-allocation devoid of the social and economic structures in which they function (Bourdieu 1998). Yet in actual reality market exchange depends on non-market exchange (Harriss-White 1998). Markets are not isolated from the context in which they are intended to function: they are shaped by formal laws, social interaction and historic relations of production. They function, for instance, *because* unequal relations within the household provide unpaid domestic labour buttressing the paid economy. Notions of gender, race and class underpin underpaid labour relations and restrict the access to the fruits of 'efficiency' to certain groups in society. In this way the Pareto optimum[8] is derived at by actually restraining the 'freedom' of the market, and efficiency is in fact a result of labour exploitation.

In neo-liberal language and thinking, effective management of water happens by treating it (as much as possible) as a commodity, the value of which is determined by economic maximization, rather than by any social or political values of equity or fair play (Barlow 1999; Bond 2000; Cleaver and Elson 1995; Lipschutz 1998; McAfee 1999; Spiertz and Wiber 1996). According to the neo-liberal paradigm, a market player is an individual unhindered by her social, material or political context. She takes decisions guided only by an economic rationale based on her full access to information, and on her capacity to calculate all possible options to determine the most efficient, optimal and profit maximizing one (Kabeer 2000). At a more ideological level, neo-liberalism is based on a version of liberal humanism which maintains that all humans, at their core, are equal and share a common capacity to reason. This allows the universalization of values and desires: differences between people are considered as fundamentally epiphenomal, which makes it possible to make generic statements about human nature, truth and other universalities and thus justifies use of a positivist epistemology. In such a liberal or humanist understanding of human beings, gender and other social differences can only be understood as attributes of persons who are characterized essentially as a pre-gendered (and pre-historical, pre-social) substance or 'core' (called the person). This precludes the understanding of people as deeply social creatures, and reduces all differences between people as rooted in differences in character or personality[9] (see Dietz 1992, 80).

Feminist scholars have argued that this 'separate self model' of an unbounded individual making rational choices harbours a western androcentric bias, discordant with those responsible for reproductive activities, and with those societies geared toward collective decision-making and responsibilities (Benería 1999; Benería and Bisnath 2004; Elson 1995; Ferber and Nelson 1993; Folbre 1994). Feminist scholars have also convincingly shown how the referent for conceptualizing humanity and the human 'core' in liberal political theory has been exclusively masculine. Indeed, the term 'man' as used in liberal thought – even by those who are willing to concede that he/him means 'all' – is not simply a linguistic device or a generic label, but a symbol for a concept reflecting both masculine values and virtues, and patriarchal practices (Dietz 1992).

Liberal humanism, and the methodological individualism with which it is often accompanied, de-socializes society by turning citizens belonging to a particular community into individual consumers competing in the market. Historic inequities and contemporary social struggles are negated by assuming all compete on a level playing field.

Epistemologically, the neo-liberal water perspective is justified by and based on a version of Enlightenment thinking in which the 'god-trick' is pervasive: the assumption that one can see everything from nowhere and that disembodied reason can produce

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accurate and 'objective' accounts of the world.[10] The god-trick allows the systematic denial of the connections between power and knowledge, and between the construction of subjectivity and power. Much water knowledge is written from the perspective of those who in positions of control: planners, administrators, managers, policy-makers.[11] Produced knowledge aims at helping *them* realize their objectives, and at solving their problems, and it enables them to speak more authoritatively through the disembodied, transcendent voice of Reason. Indeed, the persistence and popularity of neo-liberal water policies and of the theoretical models on which these are based among policy-makers are more likely to be linked to their success in generating funds and power than to the accuracy and validity of their statements about the determinants of water management performance or about the behaviour of water users[12] (cf. Mosse 2005). These three characteristics of neo-liberal thinking about water, its naturalization and universalization of political and social processes, its denial of the connections between power and knowledge, and its specific version of liberal humanism (individual rights moralism), coupled with its almost religious appeal to scientific rationality, have created an effective and convincing political language through which far-reaching re-distributions and re-allocations of water appear and can be justified as natural, inevitable and scientifically rational. The implication for feminist water analyses and agendas is that they necessarily include a critical questioning of established water discourses and languages, aimed at visualizing and exposing the working of power in and through them and at re-politicising contentious allocational and distributional questions.

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Revisiting received feminist wisdoms

A plea for women's independent ownership of resources has long been and continues to be an important item on agendas for gender equity, women's emancipation or liberation (see for elaborations of this plea Agarwal 1994; Deere and de Léon 2001). The case for women's independent titles has mainly been made for land. Deere and de Léon (2001), for instance, argue that because male migration has caused the feminization of small-scale agriculture throughout Latin America, property rights in women's names are important to ensure farm productivity, improve their access to credits and services, in addition to enhancing their bargaining position within the household and the community. Increasingly, and with the increased importance of water on national policy agendas with an increased competition over water, similar lines of argumentation have also been made for water (see Vera 2005; Zwarteveen 1997). Along with decreasing their dependency and improving their bargaining power within households and communities, having their own titles would also open the door to women's entry in water decision-making at all levels. For Latin America, the analysis of one of the first studies to mention women in irrigation systems reflects such a line of thinking (Bourque and Warren 1981). It describes how irrigation in the Peruvian research location was considered to be men's work, one of a set of key tasks that 'serve as gateways to critical resources', including land, water, transportation and cash. Because of women's dependency on men for their access to water, it argues, irrigation plays a crucial role in maintaining male dominance (Bourque and Warren 1981, 119ü23).

While these arguments were valid and needed at the time, we argue that the received feminist wisdom that individual titles are good for women and gender equity needs revisiting in the current neo-liberal moment. The most important dangers of, and doubts about titling programmes for women concern the intrinsic gender biases of the neo-liberal ideology, and the recognition that within a context strongly shaped by it the alienability

of individual water and land rights carries the dangers of dispossession (Ahlers 2002a; Cleaver and Elson 1995; Jackson 1998). In the case of Mexico, inalienable and usufructory rights were far more secure than private individual property rights (Ahlers 2005b). Furthermore, the notion that a title provides more security for the holder is problematic given the always varying availability of water. Current debates on increasing uncertainty as a result of climate change further challenge this notion (Newborne 2004). Entitling as a quick fix or utilitarian attempt is dangerously misconceived. Within a neo-liberal context that values the individual over the collective and private over public (or usufructory) property, the deadly combination is a title that is (1) divorced from land; (2) alienable; (3) individual; and (4) connotes private property, and thus exempt from public or community scrutiny.

As we have argued, in the neo-liberal formulation 'gender' can only be understood as an attribute of human beings, and women are seen as 'anatomically (and otherwise) challenged men'. In theory and principle, 'inside' the neo-liberal water domain, all actors are equal or need to become equal – at least their differences do not matter for how they interact and relate to each other in the water domain since the rules of the water game they follow are the same to everyone. In line with this view, liberal gender or feminist strategies tend to focus on 'equalizing' and 'including' women, something that is primarily achieved by removing educational and legal barriers. 'Inclusion' or 'integration' in formal decision-making bodies and in markets is something that is seen to be simultaneously good for women (or gender equity) as for the performance of water institutions and irrigation systems. Making it possible that women, too, are vested with individualized and privatized property rights fits neatly in this equation and is seen as an important precondition for development, as well as for women's empowerment. Such 'equalizing' measures and the underlying analysis overlook and ignore the social, cultural and historical dimensions of gendered inequities. Women cannot merely be added on to a Water Users Association with a title in their hands after male members and officials have been gender sensitized, expecting entrenched structural inequalities and diverse world views to merge into a singular harmonious agenda.

Gendered inequities manifest themselves not just as individual attributes, but are also rooted in gendered divisions of labour and in gendered kinship and inheritance structures that themselves are supported by and support normative gender symbolisms and languages. Feminist strategies should therefore not just attempt to 'equalize', but need to see beyond 'women'. Feminist analysis and praxis needs to be situated in larger struggles that question such taken-for-granted gendered divisions and distributions, so as to challenge what gender is about. The neo-liberal terminology is particularly ill-suited for doing this, which is why a change of metaphors and language is called for to meaningfully articulate feminist water concerns.

There are also forms of feminism that rather than individualize property, examine ways of consolidating its collective management. In these visions, the promotion of private titles would induce a highly unwanted individualism in social relations at the community level, and would provide a source of conflict in marital relations that should ideally be founded on solidarity and complementarities. Furthermore, these streams of thought perceive individualization as a threat to environmental integrity. Forms of eco-feminism take this line of reasoning, often referring to the existence of harmonious traditions in the past. Some indígena groups in the Andes likewise base their analyses on the postulation of complementarities rather than conflicts between the genders.

By contrasting the (presumed) existence of harmonious indigenous gender relations to the high rates of divorce and gendered conflicts in western 'modern' societies,

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this reasoning points at modernization and western ideologies as the cause rather than the cure for gendered inequities (for a clear example see Grillo 1994). While problematic on many other accounts, such reasoning provides an interesting critique to analyses and strategies that emphasize the separation of the genders, and the desirability of women's individual autonomy, by emphasizing the recognition of interdependencies and complementarities. Many Latin American peasant women themselves would not easily identify with analyses that stress individual autonomy over family and community values.

Indeed, the normative emphasis on the autonomous individual as the primary agent, or the separate self-model, of neo-liberal policy and of some feminist narratives alike, is problematic in that it constructs family and community collectivities primarily as key sites of gender struggle, and in that it conceives of gender relations mainly as antagonistic and conflicting. The social dependencies that are intrinsic to water ownership should be neither denied nor romanticized but require a sound relational analysis that recognizes both collaboration as well as conflict, and that can be used to identify sources of security alongside sources of vulnerability in terms of water. Gender relations are neither solely harmonious nor antagonistic, but involve common interests as well as conflicting ones, emotional dependencies alongside economic support. Women and men precariously balance personal with collective needs and interests in their households and communities, simultaneously legitimizing and contesting inequalities.

A further point of doubt about the desirability of women having water 'of their own' is that the 'individual titles for women' plea is neither very straightforward nor clear in the case of water. Unlike land, water is not something that can be straightforwardly 'owned', nor can rights be reduced to a mere monetary value. As we elaborated above, understanding water ownership and water security therefore requires recognition of its fuzziness and multi-layeredness, which can be summarized as: its cultural and social embeddedness, its links with infrastructure and technology, and (it is also important to note) its dependence on collective forms of organization and collaboration. Not only are entitlements layered and nested with less recognized and informal dimensions, but because they are relational they serve as political and economic vehicles in context specific ways.

The claims and powers of a water right, as well as the different obligations that are associated with it, cannot be easily predicted on the basis of either prevailing ideologies or on the basis of formal legislation. Instead, they require a contextualized understanding, based on particular water use, distribution and decision-making practices and processes. The rights, powers and responsibilities a right embodies also vary depending on the specific social domain, or the level of social and political interaction and struggle referred to. In households, rights become embedded in wider intra-household relations and negotiations. In the fields, location of the fields in relation to the canals and relationships with field-neighbours co-influence one's water security. In decision-making arenas, the ability to access the process of negotiation and use the language of authority in order to voice concerns and demand respect matter in determining one's success in bending decisions to one's favour. What is struggled over varies a great deal depending on the domain in which it takes place: the social relations between the different water actors are governed by different rules and norms, and their identities are differently shaped and performed depending on the domain.

A last major difficulty with individual property titles for women as a feminist strategy has to do with the large variety of roles and interests men and women can have. Gender relations and identities interact with other social identities and relations. It is probably no exaggeration to say that the only thing most female irrigators have in common is their lack

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of formal rights and powers, but little can be concluded from this commonality in terms of gendered interests or needs. Gender is seldom the primary or most important axis along which water responsibilities and identities are divided, nor can water needs and interests be easily categorized on the basis of gender. What women and men do, need and want in relation to water is only partially shaped by gender, and is a function of complex social and political dynamics. These dynamics are clearly gendered, but in articulation with contingent socio-economic processes determining their livelihoods. Even though water needs and interests are clearly gendered in their manifestation, it would hardly ever be strategically wise for women to engage in water struggles as women or on the basis of their gender identity.

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Conclusion

A feminist analysis of water security needs to place politics and power at the centre of its framework. This not only entails a more refined analysis of questions of water allocation and distribution, but also a dismantling of conceptual abstractions that reify and reproduce boundaries and binaries such as those between the natural and the human or between the private and the public. Such an analysis also demands a better linking of 'local' water struggles to larger historical and economic trends and forces, and a critical awareness of how struggles over resources are shaped by, and partly occur through, struggles over meanings and discourses.

Rights to water are less fixed and more prone to be contested at various levels and in different socio-legal domains than rights to other natural resources. From the above discussion it becomes clear that water rights cannot be reduced to a mere monetary value or volumetric quantity. We have challenged the narrow and one-dimensional neo-liberal conceptualization of the water user as a market player whose sole objective is to economically maximize her water use. In terms of a feminist water strategy, the realization that water is a specific resource and that human beings have more than economic identities calls for an exploration of ways to re-insert a social function into the entitlement process, or rather for ways to have titles embody social property. This would translate into attaching a dimension to the title that expresses its public interest, such that the title provides a right to water with the obligation to ensure its social function.[13] Security consequently becomes determined by social imperatives of sufficient water for both productive and reproductive uses, recognizing and valuing uses that may not translate into increased productivity per se, or higher economic values determined by world market prices. It means the willingness to define water security in different and more collective terms that may demand a renewed faith in regularisation, and it critically calls for a democratization of decision-making processes.

We have argued for a re-thinking of the feminist social project away from an individual or autonomy oriented struggle. In the current neo-liberal moment, the focus on the material underpinning of empowerment has degraded to inserting women into the market rather than building bargaining power. Cornwall and Nyamu-Musembi (2005, 8) argue that the concept of autonomy may be more appropriate at the level of feminist organizing, to allow for diversity in 'imagined social alternatives'. In this respect we emphasize the need for increased critical political engagement with universalistic approaches such as entitlement programmes. Particularly in relation to the water sector, it is important for a feminist project to explicitly situate its analysis in the structural transformation currently taking place, embedding gender dynamics in the world historical process of privatisation. In essence this implies critically engaging with the ideology underpinning current water reforms and developing an alternative imagination that

includes questioning orthodox language and positivist logic to prevent the current process of women's hands perhaps being untied but essentially left empty.

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Notes

1. Trained as irrigation engineers, we focused our gender critique on irrigation development. Elsewhere (Zwarteveen and Bennett 2004; Ahlers 2000) we have argued that while gender became an accepted topic in water supply and sanitation as early as the 1980s due to locating women stereotypically in the domestic domain, in the field of irrigation this was far more difficult to accomplish (see Zwarteveen 2007 for a detailed examination of the reasons thereof). Even though work on gender and irrigation has been available since the early 1980s (Dey 1981), only more than a decade later, after numerous case studies and theoretical analysis of gender and water rights, did gender issues in irrigation achieve the recognition it deserves.
2. For Mexico see for instance Ahlers (2002a, 2005b); Carmona (1997); Pacheco (1999); Monsalvo-Valezquez and Wester (2002); for Bolivia see Gutiérrez and Cardona (1998); Prins (1996); Tuitelaars de Quitón et al. (1994); for Ecuador see Ahlers and Smits (1991); Arroyo and Boelens (1998, 2004); Bastidas (1999); Francke (1993); Jacome and Krol (1994); Krol (1994); Vokral (1991); for Peru see Bourque and Warren (1981); Bunker and Seligmann (1986); Lynch (1991, 1993), Van de Pol (1992). For multiple country cases see Bennett, Poblete, and Rico (2004); Boelens and Zwarteveen (2002); and Vera (2005).
3. We are aware of the ongoing discussion concerning the problems arising from using a generic and universalistic notion of the term neo-liberal (see Castree 2006; Bakker 2007). We take the Chicago school economic policy framework implemented in Chile during the Pinochet dictatorship (1973–89) and applied by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund as lending conditionality in Mexico since the Mexico peso crisis in 1982 as our reference policy model. For the water sector this policy framework is literally the basis for the World Bank 1993 water policy directive that has greatly influenced water policy and legal frameworks throughout the world.
4. This is highly influenced by the shift from private to state controlled irrigation systems in the early twentieth century and the movement back towards privatization and decentralization in the late twentieth century.
5. Privatization reforms are argued on the premise of failing state (and collective) management of resources and service delivery (for irrigation see Merrey 1996; Ostrom 1990, 1992; Vermillion 1991), whether these are national assets such as oil or railways, or public services such as health care and education.
6. For a conprehensive version of this argument see Briscoe (1996); Rosegrant and Binswanger (1994); Rosegrant and Gazmuri (1994); Perry, Rock, and Seckler (1997); Ringler, Rosegrant, and Paisner (2000).
7. For a full discussion on how accumulation by dispossession unfolds in the irrigation sector in Mexico, see Ahlers (2005b).
8. The pareto optimum is the situation characterised as optimally economically efficient as it describes the moment when no further improvements to any individual well-being can be made without reducing the well-being of another. In other words, the optimal distribution of well-being among a number of individuals has been reached. This notion has been critiqued extensively for its primary focus on the individual as disconnected from a social context.
9. In neo-liberal thinking, water use and management are typically postulated as activities of which the rationale can be directly deduced from, and is limited to, a clearly delimited and relatively insulated water domain. Who you are in this domain is thus seen as primarily a function of the characteristics of the domain itself, related to the internal rules of the game and its functional hierarchies, rather than as stemming from any 'outside' social context or identity (Zwarteveen 2007).

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10. The term 'god-trick' comes from Donna Haraway (1991). Earlier, the utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham used the idea of a 'god-view' from nowhere and everywhere in his design of the panoptical prison in the eighteenth century. On this basis, Foucault (1995) developed his ideas on power, discourse, disciplining and normalization.
11. In other words, water knowledge is written 'from the centre'. Chambers referred to this as the 'center-outward, core-periphery' perspective (Chambers 1989, 6). A powerful characteristic of the neo-liberal water policy discourse is that this centre is made invisible, thereby strengthening its disciplining power.
12. For empirical cases, see Ahlers (2005a) and Rap, Wester, and Pérez-Prado (2004) for Mexico; Vera and Zwarteveen (2008) for Peru; and Boelens (2008) for Ecuador.
13. Fernandes develops this notion of social property for urban development in the Brazilian context (Fernandes and Rolnik 1998; Fernandez and Varley 1998; Fernandes 1999, 2002).

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Notes on contributors

Rhodante Ahlers graduated as an irrigation engineer from Wageningen University, but after years of working in the water sector went on to do her PhD in international Planning at Cornell University. Her main research interests have been the political economy of international water politics and policy, in particular the social and environmental impacts of contemporary neo-liberal inspired entitlement policies for formalizing land and water rights, and the institutional frameworks that enable this. Her current interest lies in linking processes of dispossession of natural resources with migration flows and the reconfiguration of citizenship rights for transnational households.

Margreet Zwarteveen is an irrigation engineer by training, but soon deviated from hard-core design to become interested in the interactions between the social and the technical in water. She studied at Wageningen University for her MSc, worked for some five years at the International Water Management Institute to develop and lead their research programme on gender and water and then returned to Wageningen to assume work as a lecturer and researcher. She published many articles and books as well as more policy-oriented writings on gender and water, and more widely on questions of equity and justice in water. In 2006 she obtained her PhD at Wageningen University, entitled 'Wedlock or deadlock? Feminists' attempts to engage irrigation engineers'. At the moment, Margreet is co-editing a volume of work on gender and water in South Asia with Sara Ahmed and Suman Gautam, which will appear in 2009.

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ABSTRACT TRANSLATION

La cuestión del agua en el feminismo: el control del agua y las inequidades de género en la era neo-liberal

El actual momento neo-liberal en políticas de agua parece ofrecer posibilidades para llevar a cabo las ambiciones feministas. Algunos académicos feministas ven la individualización y privatización de los derechos sobre los recursos, como algo que ofrece posibilidades para confrontar inequidades de género arraigadas en (y reproducidas por) el acceso a los recursos productivos, tales como la tierra y el agua, que histórica y estructuralmente favorecen a los hombres. Pero dudamos seriamente del potencial progresista feminista de las reformas neo-liberales en el sector del agua. Nos centramos en el agua utilizada con propósitos de agricultura, porque las propuestas neo-liberales sobre el agua tienen la premisa de quitar agua a la agricultura para utilizarla en usos con un mayor beneficio económico marginal. Un primer grupo de dudas envuelve al agua como un recurso específico, mayormente por su propensión a fluir. Los derechos al agua están menos fijos y más susceptibles a ser disputados a distintos niveles y en diferentes dominios socio-legales que los derechos a otros recursos naturales. El segundo grupo surge de nuestro desacuerdo con las bases ideológicas del proyecto neo-liberal. Refleja nuestra preocupación sobre cómo las reformas del agua articulan con estructuras político-económicas y dinámicas históricas más amplias, caracterizadas por nuevas formas de expansión capitalista. Más aún, el lenguaje y los conceptos convencionales de las políticas neoliberales tienden a esconder precisamente a aquellos temas que, desde una perspectiva feminista crítica, necesitan ser cuestionados. Las reflexiones feministas sobre la inseguridad en la posesión y las inequidades sociales con respecto al agua chocan con los términos de un marco neo-liberal que invisibiliza, naturaliza y objetiviza las políticas y los poderes involucrados en la re-distribución del agua. Una respuesta feminista necesita desafiar la individualización, la mercantilización y el enfoque consumidor/cliente del paradigma neoliberal.

Palabras clave: manejo del agua; género; feminismo; derecho al agua; neo-liberalismo

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女权主义与水的问题：新自由主义时代水的控制和性别的不平等

水政策在目前的新自由主义时刻提供了实现女权主义者抱负的各种可能性。一些女权主义学者认为资源拥有权的个性化以及私有化提供了面对性别不平等的可能性。这些根深蒂固的性别不平等是因为历史和结构环境许可男性优先得到例如土地和水的生产新资源而形成的。但是，我们深切地质疑水部门的新自由主义改革能够帮助实现逐步性女权主义之潜能。我们把焦点放在用于农业目的的水因为在新自由主义思维下的水计划主张把水用在比农业拥有更高的经济回报之项目上。我们首组的质疑是关于水作为一种特定的资源。这是因为水是有流动性的，所以它的拥有权不太固定并且比起其它资源的拥有权也较容易在各个层次和不同的经济社会法律领域引起争执。第二组的质疑源是基于我们不同意新自由主义计划的思想基础。它反映了我们关心水政策制改革如何回应资本主义扩张的新途径所涉及的政治-经济结构和历史的动态。此外，透过批判式女权主义的角度，我们可以意识到主流新自由主义有关水政策的言语和概念往往盖过那些必须被质问的议题。新自由主义的框不止隐藏了水重新支配所牵涉的政治和权力并且也把它们自然化和物体化。这正好与女权主义者有关水任期之不确定以及当中所引发的社会不平等的反思起了正面的冲突。女权主义可以作出相对的回应，来挑战以个人化，市场化以及消费者或客户为重点的新自由主义模式。

关键词：水管理；性别；女权主义；水拥有权；新自由主义